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AUTHOR Fontana, Vincent J.
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ABSTRACT

America's children and their families are in trouble, trouble so deep as to constitute a serious threat to the future of our society. The major source of that threat is bureaucratic "benign neglect." We have failed to recognize that the problems of the multitroubled family in a changing society are the problems of the entire society in the midst of moral and economic crisis and cannot be solved except in that context. Unless government and the people join child and family advocates the well being of American families will continue to decline and the forces that produce alienation of our youth will increase. Within the larger issue of families in trouble, we have the ravages of child abuse, wife battering, alienated, troublesome, and troubled adolescents, epidemic divorce rates, teenage pregnancies, drug and alcohol abuse--all of which are adding to the difficulties of a multitroubled fragmented family. These outward expressions of violence and unrest are truly symptomatic of the much larger and deeper problem of family dysfunction. Many government-supported programs are necessary, but let us not forget that the prevention of child abuse and neglect ultimately depends on the restoration of a sense of family and a healthy community life. (RH)

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"A TROUBLED SOCIETY - CHILDREN IN CRISIS"

Vincent J. Fontana, M.D.
Medical Director and Pediatrician-in-Chief
New York Foundling Hospital Center for Parent and Child Development
New York, New York

Today, we are witnessing an assault on the family unit which threatens the future psychological and physical health of our children! All we need do is review a set of disturbing statistics.

We are the richest nation in the world, yet an estimated ten million of our children slip through the cracks of our health care system. Presently, nearly 35% of our children are not adequately immunized against diseases we know how to control. One million children are being maltreated annually in our American Homes; at least 100,000 are being sexually abused; 300,000 are being psychologically abused; countless numbers of children suffer from insidious or purposeful neglect, and most appalling, an estimated 4,000 children die each year from their abuse or neglect. We rank in our infant mortality rates --- close to those of highly underdeveloped nations. The rate of juvenile delinquency in the United States is rising faster than the rate of growth of the juvenile population.

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Over one million adolescents become pregnant each year --- that is one out of every ten adolescent families. Of these 600,000 give birth - babies raising babies. Teen age pregnancy among white adolescents rose 140% in the last two decades. The United States has by far the highest rate of teen age pregnancy of any industrial nation.

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death among youngsters between the ages of fifteen and twenty years. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the suicide rate for the adolescent population has tripled since 1955. Suicide is the third highest cause of deaths for teenagers surpassed only by automobile accidents and homicides.

Over 500,000 children are living away from their families in facilities ranging from individula foster family and group homes, to large institutions. Some of these have special needs as a result of their physical or emotional handicaps. Many of these children have no disability, but were removed from parents where stresses were too great, or where there was abuse and/or neglect which was the result of these stresses.

Over one million children each year are propelled into single parent families by the epidemic of separations and divorces and as a result of the massive number of teenage pregnancies. It is estimated that 50% of the children born in the eighties will live in a single parent home for a large part of their childhood. 49% of married women with children less than a year old work outside the home. Grandparents have disappeared from the family scene. Aunts and uncles have disappeared and now mothers or fathers are

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disappearing, leaving the child with weak, ineffective, or non-existant kinship networks. We ask ourselves what about these changes in family structure, divorces , separations and parental attitudes; could they be responsible for these disheartening statistics? Have adolescent peer influences been substituted for the concerned and caring parents?

Children today are physically healthier but impaired in their developmental, psychosocial, and educational maturation. Problems in adolescent sexuality, substance abuse, child abuse, and domestic violence are not uncommon occurrences in the majority of our American households today. Families are different! The working mother, the one parent family, alternative lifestyles, and the mounting stresses of daily life constitute the new "ecology" of contemporary family life.

America's children and their families are in trouble, --- trouble so deep as to constitute a serious threat to the future of our society. The major source of that threat is nothing less than the bureaucratic "benign neglect" of our families and our children. Our national rhetoric notwithstanding, the actual government expenditures provided for family stability in the United States today are such that, clearly , children come last. In the last quarter century all statistics indicate that we have not improved the lives of children and families proportionally to our dollar investment. Children unfortunately are the forgotten members of our society, and most discouragingly they are the victims of governmental cutbacks and society's everyday indifference.

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There is no doubt in my mind, that a society which neglects, abuses, and allows it's children to die, is a society that cannot survive. Rather it is a society that will disorganize and disintegrate. It will become a society that has failed. Thus far, we have failed to reduce the physical and mental debilitation of children and their parents who are under an inordinate amount of stress as a result of poverty. We have not provided them with the support systmes that could enable them to function effectively within their home and their community.

We have failed to recognize that the problems of the multitroubled family in a changing society are the problems of the entire society in the midst of moral and economic crisis and cannot be solved except in that context.

The economic conditions of inflation, recession, unemployemnt poverty and hunger bring with them despair, doubt, depression and the shattering of a parent's ability to cope, turning against their young. A confused, insecure parent without human support systems is at the mercy of a chaotic environmental surrounding. Society has failed to provide many of these parents with a "bail out" for support, or relief. It is no wonder that with these parental pressures the child suffers - who in turn enters the same, if not a worse world!

Unless government and the poeple join in a common cause with the child and family advocates in our country the well being of American families will continue to decline, and the forces that produce alientation of our youth will increase. The teenage delinquents, alcoholics, drug addicts, and prostitutes we see in our streets, have, for the most part, been the products of a multi-troubeld violent home in which they have

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suffered maltreatment and in which they have learned violence. These are the "street" children that assault, rob, murder, prostitute themselves, or commit suicide. These are the "throwaway," "runaway" and "kicked-out" children. There are thousands of such troubled, emotionally damaged youth who are growing up finding if difficult to survive with or without parents. These are the children who have been abandoned at home, have developed hostility, and have declared open war on society and their parents. For these youngsters the lines of communication between parent and child have become non-existant, being replace by harsh words, severe punishment and domestic violence which intensifies a cycle of violence breeding violence from generation to generation. This violence spills over into the community and effects all of society.

The family as we have known it has always been the basic social unit upon which any society depends on for its future. It has retained its viability because of the sense of tradition. It has proved to be flexible, able to change with the times. At the present there is no more acceptable system for raising a child which better assures their basic normal physical and psychological development. The family unit usually porvides for the basic needs of the growing child. Parents instill values --- they give genesis to and nurture religious beliefs --- they provide the child with the equipment to become a productive and responsible adult. Today we wonder whether even the present family, much less the family as we see it emerging, is capable of providing for the essential needs of our children's normal growth and development.

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This is a critical time for those who care about children and families to raise their voices in behalf of children and restore a sense of family. It is a sad commentary that we continue to see an upsurge in the maltreatment of children. An increase of 15 of reported cases every year, in spite of all of our efforts. It was not until 1962 that child maltreatment was recognized as a serious medical-legal-social problem and a serious threat to the welfare of children and their families. The pioneering scientific articles, "The Battered Child Syndrome" by Dr. C. Henry Kempe at the University of Colorado in the Journal of the American Medical Association and the "Maltreatment Syndrome in Children" in the New England Journal of Medicine by Dr. Vincent J. Fontana, disproved the myths that all parents are capable and desirous of meeting their child's emotional and physical needs, and that parents would never intentionally harm their children. Unfortunately, many parents have ambivalent feelings of hate and love for their children.

Children are individual human beings possessing rights and entitled to a life free of deprivation and persecution. These rights should be respected in reality as well as in rhetoric; in public policy as well as in dollars. We must assume an advocacy effort on behalf of all children, especially those that are being abused and neglected by parents, by society, or by institutions. In order to accomplish this need for action, we must be knowledgeable about issues facing children and families so that a concrete plan of action may be developed in a coordinated effort with other interested agencies, groups and professionals.

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Child maltreatment is defined as "Any act of commission or omission by individuals in institutions or society as a whole and any conditions resulting from such acts or inaction which deprive children of equal rights and liberties and/or interfere with their optimal development." Such acts of commission and omission are therefore, by definition abusive or neglectful acts.

The cultural theories of violence hold that the source of the child abuse problem lies within the family. The social theories hold that the source of the problem lies outside the family; namely, within the power structure in society.

Samples of societal abuse are infant hunger and malnutrition throughout the world; infant mortality; poverty; inadequate medical care; poor education; sanctioned corporal punishment in schools, abuse in correctional institutions, and the abuses that are noted in some of our child care facilities and juvenile courts.

Perhaps, there is considerably more child abuse in American society because of the cultural norms of child rearing that allow the use of a certain amount of physical force or corporal punishment toward children by adults caring for them whether within the schools, institutions or their own homes.

Within the issue of families in trouble, we have the ravages of child abuse, wife battering, alienated troublesome and troubled adolescents, epidemic divorce rates, teen age pregnancies, drug and alcohol abuse -- all of which are adding to the difficulties of a multitroubled fragmented family.

These outward expressions of violence and unrest are truly symptomatic

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of the much larger and deeper problem of family dysfunction.

There is no question that patterns developed during childhood tend to influence the future adult behavior. Tragically the abused child of today may become the violent adult of tomorrow. Certainly, the home is where much of the violence begins--and can be attributed to the greatly lessening influence and role of the family as a constructive force in today's society.

If we are to decrease the incidence of child abuse and neglect some substantial changes in attitudes, practices and programs are required. Funds will be needed for the development and evaluation of innovative, child and family oriented programs that will be aimed at keeping families together. Despite the furor over child abuse in this country and statements that America is a child oriented and child caring nation, fiscal support for children and families in need reflects a neglect on the part of a government that clearly has the resources to nourish and enhance its children.

The United States Federal Government in the last decade has spent less than 10 percent of our gross national product on children who represent 30 percent of our population and 100 percent of our future.

How can we judge the growth of any society and whether it will survive and prosper? There are many indices -- the gross national product, the birth rate, crime statistics, mental health data, etc. One overlying important factor that is often not considered is our generation's concern for the next generation. We are beginning to see social and family disintegration all around us and the responsibility for this state of affairs lies with our vast uncaring systems.

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Let us be aware that the American Family today is being threatened by the epidemic of divorces and separations, the demise of the extended family, the increase in adolescent pregnancies and the mounting incidence of child and adolescent maltreatment. We must recognize the social and economic pressures on parents today and work toward developing preventive human support programs that will preserve and strengthen rather than destroy and weaken the family unit. We must call for and support programs that will eliminate poverty, make the poor self sufficient, support educational programs for parenting both in the school system and in the community. We need programs for drug abuse and alcohol prevention, delinquency prevention, nutrition and runaway youth and a type of national health insurance that will guarantee children a life of normality. Though these many government supported programs are necessary let us not forget that ultimately the prevention of child abuse and neglect depends not only on agency involvement after family breakdowns but also on restoring a sense of family and a healthy community life.

Today's children are this country's future leaders, lawyers, doctors, teachers, scientists. They will be shouldering tomorrow's responsibilities. They represent the link between the past and the future. They are this nation's most important natural resource. Should we not be preserving them rather than destroying them?

If we care about the future of our society a wise investment in our children now will assure our country's safe journey into the 21st century.

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